

Marina Litvinenko

The Untouchables are safe from prosecution at home

Marina Litvinenko is the widow of former Russian dissident and FSB officer, Alexander Litvinenko, who died in 2006 after being poisoned with radioactive polonium-210. In October 2011, she won the right for an inquest into her husband's death to be conducted by a UK coroner, to include the examination of all existing theories related to her husband's death, including the possible complicity of the Russian government.

I am presently trying to find out the truth about the death of my husband, Alexander Litvinenko, through a coroner's inquest and a public inquiry, where the information deemed secret by the government can nevertheless be legally reviewed. This is a great demonstration of the prowess of the British legal system, where one man is able to fight for justice against all odds, even if it seems like the individual is up alone against the world.

However, our compatriots who live in the Russian Federation cannot enjoy such legal privileges. Russians live under a legal system that bends to every whim of money and power, and where less than one percent of judicial cases end in acquittal, meaning that for an ordinary Russian citizen, accidentally crossing the path of someone more influential or wealthy than himself, means that he could suddenly be on the wrong side of the law, being tried for a fabricated or biased case.

While highly publicised cases such as those of Alexei Navalny and Pussy Riot get a lot of media attention, there are many others who have been incarcerated on fabricated evidence and false accusations in corrupt courts, sent to inhumane prisons or tortuous labour camps without ever having had the chance to tell their stories. They probably never will, as death and terminal

illness (such as AIDS and tuberculosis) are common occurrences in Russian jails and prison camps.

The tragic case of Sergei Magnitsky brought to the world's attention not only the corruption within the Russian political establishment, but also the complete comfort and security that the “trigger men” and swindlers connected to the Putin regime enjoy. The “Russian Untouchables” – a term coined by Bill Browder – is therefore an extremely accurate description of such officials. The “Untouchables” are completely safe from prosecution at home, and are protected from extradition to a foreign country when they are accused of a crime abroad, as we saw in the case of Andrei Lugovoy, the prime suspect in the murder of my husband.

Being completely safe from any sort of legal prosecution, such officials often become very wealthy and influential due to the rampant corruption in Russia. If such an official finds himself at odds with a citizen who isn't in a position of power, the official is free to pursue extra-legal methods to settle his accounts, be it murder, racket, blackmail or violent provocation, either by himself, with help from fellow officials, or with the support of organised crime, which is closely linked with, and protected by, the Russian justice system.

In effect, Russia has turned the concept of a legal system inside out, persecuting and convicting the innocent, while at the same time protecting and helping out the guilty. The rich get richer by the day, thanks to Russia's enormous natural reserves, while a significant number of Russia's 143.4 million population lives below the poverty line, and male life expectancy hovers around 60.

This is perhaps why rich Russians are not great fans of the Motherland. These people prefer to shop in New York, get their country homes in the south of France and send their children to school in Britain. The country they have drained of its resources holds little value to them, aside from being a continuous source of illegitimate income; they would much rather spend their ill-gotten gains elsewhere.

This is why the EU Magnitsky Law is so important. There is little the outside world can do to influence the internal situation in Russia through

political pressure or trade restrictions, because Russia is the world's largest country and Europe's main oil and gas provider. Economic sanctions would hurt ordinary Russians more than the government. However, not allowing "Russian Untouchables" to spend their ill-gotten money abroad by targeted individual sanctions is the least the West can do to uphold its values and help those who do not have the legal protections of a democracy.